HOSPITALITY

December 24, 2000
FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
John M. Buchanan

The Singing of Angels

There must be always remaining in every person's life some place for the singing of angels – some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful .... throwing all the rest of life into a new and created relatedness. Something that glows in one bright white light of penetrating beauty and meaning – then passes. The commonplace is shot through now with new glory – old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all of the crassness of life, despite all of the hardness of life, despite all of the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.

Howard Thurman
The Mood of Christmas, p. 10-11

FOURTH
PRESBY
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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HOSPITALITY

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Micah 5:2-5a (NRSV)
Luke 2: 1-7 (NRSV)

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke1:7)

Dear God, on this bright cold winter day, we come to you again, together—family and friends and neighbors and strangers; a congregation of your people, to hear the story we have known and loved since we were children. Quiet any voice in us but your own, and startle us again with the story's beauty and importance and truth, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes the Gospel story is told obliquely within other stories, ordinary human stories, stories which do not at first sound at all like religious stories.

Kent Haruf, who teaches English at Southern Illinois University has written a wonderful novel, *Plainsong,* about life in a small Colorado town. It is a deceptively simple story about the lives of ordinary people, to whom ordinary things happen and who respond in ordinary ways, and who are, on occasion, capable of extraordinary grace; a father and two sons, their mother struggling with depression; a public school teacher caring for her aging and increasingly difficult father; a seventeen year old girl, pregnant, alone; and two elderly brothers, bachelors, cattle ranchers who live seventeen miles south of the small town of Holt, Colorado.

Victoria's mother has thrown her out of the house because of her pregnancy. Maggie Jones, the school teacher, took her in, but Maggie's demented father is making the situation intolerable. So one day, Maggie drives 17 miles south of Holt to the ranch of the two elderly brothers, Raymond and Harold McPheron. The brothers are on a tractor, returning to the house. They'd been feeding cattle out in winter pasture.

Let me read just a bit of *Plainsong* to you.

> **"She stepped away from the barn and stood waiting for them. They moved heavily in their winter overalls. . . .**
> **'You're going to freeze yourself standing there,' Harold said. 'You better get out of the wind. Are you lost?'**
> **'Probably,' Maggie Jones said. She laughed. But I wanted to talk to you.**
> **Oh, oh. I don't like the sound of that. Don't tell me I scared you already, she said.**
> **Why [heck], Harold said. You probably want something. I do, she said."**

The three of them enter the modest bachelor farm house with stacks of magazines and greasy pieces of farm machinery on all the furniture.

They sit down.

"I came out here to ask you a favor, she said to them.
That's so? Harold said.
What is it?

There is a girl I know who needs some help, Maggie said. She's a good girl but she's gotten into trouble. I think you might be able to help her. I would like you to consider it and let me know.

'What's wrong with her?' Harold said. She need a donation of money?
No, she needs a lot more than that.
What sort of trouble is she in, Raymond said.

She's seventeen. She's four months pregnant and she doesn't have a husband.
Well, yeah, Harold said. I reckon that could amount to trouble.'

Maggie explains that the girl's father abandoned the family years ago, her mother won't have her in the house, because she's gotten pregnant, the father of her child doesn't want anything to do with her.
'All right then,' Harold said. You got our attention. You say you don't want money. What do you want?
She sipped her coffee . . .looked at the two old brothers . . . .I want something improbable, she said. That's what I want. I want you to think about taking this girl in. Of letting her live with you.
They stared at her.
You're fooling, Harold said.
No, Maggie said, I am not fooling.
They were dumbfounded. They looked at her . . . as if she might be dangerous. They peered into the palms of their hands . . . and looked out the window . . . .
Oh, I know it sounds crazy, she said. I suppose it is crazy. But that girl needs somebody . . . .She needs a home for these months. And you, she smiled at them—you old [solitary boys] need somebody too. Somebody or someone besides an old red cow to care about and worry over. It's too lonesome out here. Well, look at you. You're going to die someday without ever having enough trouble in your life. Not the right kind anyway. This is your chance.'
After a long silence, Harold says, 'Let's get back to the money part. Money'd be a lot easier.
Yes, she said. It would. But not nearly as much fun.'
Maggie leaves asks them to think about it and leaves. The brothers return to work "as mutely and numbly as if they had been stunned into a sudden and permanent silence by such a proposal.

On a cold night long ago, after an exhausting journey of nearly a week, a man knocked on the door of a Bethlehem inn. The young woman with him was heavily pregnant. They had to have shelter. The inn was full. But someone—the innkeeper—offered what he had, a stable and there they spent the night and there her child was born.

The innkeeper's people, the people of Israel, for centuries had practiced hospitality to the stranger, the alien, the needy as a centerpiece of their faith. From their own history of captivity and wandering in the desert and exile—they knew the life giving power of the simple notion of hospitality.

Later, followers of Jesus retained and renewed the practice. They ate at one another's table. They sheltered one another. Still later they developed institutional forms of the old virtue of hospitality—hospices for pilgrims and travelers, hospitals for unwanted infants and rejected elderly. The monasteries accepted guests, always and without question and still today, monasteries include guest quarters for travelers and spiritual seekers.

Author, Kathleen Norris, whose own faith journey has been nourished and enriched by her experience with a Benedictine monastery tells the story of an old Benedictine nun with Alzheimers "who every day insists on being placed in her wheelchair at the entrance to the monastery's nursing home wing so that she can greet everyone who comes." Kathleen says, "She's no longer certain what she is welcoming people to—but hospitality is so deeply engrained in her that it has become her whole life." (*Amazing Grace,* p.265)

What ever happened to it? Modern, urban life, for one thing. The insularity, the wariness, the caution we all develop as urban survival skills. If you have ever had your purse snatched or your wallet lifted—as I have—twice—or, worse yet, if you have been mugged or assaulted, you know how long it takes to get over an automatic suspicion and wariness and even fear of the stranger.

We urbanites learn to keep our eyes straight ahead, and not even look at the panhandler on the corner, the woman who approaches with her hand out, the Streetwise salesperson. And it is not all harshness. We learn by experience that some of those who want our money, want to buy booze. Besides you can't buy a Streetwise or even give a dollar to each one of the salesmen who ask to help the homeless.

That's part of what has happened and perhaps the lesson of the season is that the results, the impact this protective insularity has on our own spirits, our souls, is not very healthy. Kathleen Norris argues that hospitality is life giving to the recipient and also the giver: that she and her husband feel refreshed, renewed, enriched, when they have extended hospitality, opened their home, shared food and drink with others. So maybe it wouldn't hurt to open ourselves again, to take a little risk, to risk that our dollar might purchase cheap wine rather than a bowl of soup.

And part of what the church of Jesus Christ is for is to extend hospitality in a way none of us can individually.

I have come to the conclusion that the church is in trouble in our culture, because we have forgotten about hospitality: our buildings are locked up tightly—warm, secure, comfortable, beautifully appointed and maintained—and locked up—to keep out those who want to come inside.

Episcopal priest and popular author, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells about leaving her church office on a snowy afternoon, only to encounter Luther, a homeless man who spends his time walking between big Atlanta churches in shoes that do not fit. Luther drinks and has lung cancer and he loves churches.

Taylor asked how he was doing and got the full answer, none of which made much sense. "Luther, I've got to go home now," she said, unfortunately. "What a thing to say for one who did not have one." Luther brushed it aside. "This is my home," he said, waving his arm toward the church. "This is the only home I have." (*The Preaching Life,* p.156)

It is a continuing national scandal, not only that there are homeless people, a large percentage of whom are on the streets because we have decided that we can't afford the institutional care so many of them desperately need. It is a national scandal that tax relief continues to be a potent campaign promise: that state legislators made sure our tax rebates arrived a week before election—while people are homeless. It is a spiritual scandal that Americans have now accommodated to the existence of homeless people—and are shocked to return from traveling overseas and to realize that there are few if any people sleeping on the streets, over heating vents, in the corners of public buildings, in London, Paris, Rome.

"This is the only home I have," Luther said. And it is true—here—at Fourth Presbyterian Church. Needy people, often homeless people, come here every day to wash up and use the restrooms, to visit the Social Service Center for a bowl of soup and sandwich, for a coat or sweater, for someone to talk to.

Not long ago the Director of our Social Service Center discovered a woman and two children, seven and one years old, sleeping on the porch of the manse: they hadn't eaten since the day before. They had been staying with the woman's mother but there had been a fight and they had to leave. Then they were in a shelter and again a fight resulted in they're having to leave. They had been on the streets for a month. Our staff provided warm soup, changed the little one's diaper, made some phone calls to get them help, including medical attention. As they left, the seven year old said, "I hope we have a place to live by Christmas. If not, how will Santa Claus find us?"

I called down to the Social Service Center this week as the temperature dropped and the snow piled up and except for one brief period, we were open, receiving guests. I asked how many people depend on us—what is that extended family of guests who regard us in a way

as home?—and was told about 300. Every Sunday evening we open our doors for a Community Supper. Every Sunday between 80 and 100 people sit down, in this church and eat a hot, nutritious meal.

There are risks, of course. The homeless sometimes don't behave the way we do, or wish they would. It can be hard on the floor and the tables and the rest rooms. If you leave the doors of the church open all day every day, as we do, so that people can meditate and pray, but also come in out of the cold and rest and sometimes sleep, sooner or later someone will make a mess, or write graffiti on the walls, a small price to pay, actually.

Hospitality is risky. Yale theologian Miroslav Volf writes, "I open my arms, make a movement of the self toward the other . . . and do not know whether I will be misunderstood, despised, even violated or whether my actions will be appreciated, supported, reciprocated. I can become a savior or a victim, possibly both. Embrace is grace, grace is a gamble, always." (*Exclusion and Embrace,* p.147)

There are risks but the biggest one of all when you extend hospitality, when you open the doors of your home—or your church or your heart—is that nothing will ever be the same. And that's precisely what Christmas is about.

Mary and Joseph needed a place to spend the night so that the Christ child could be born.

God came to humankind, looking for a place to dwell.

Every time we retell the story and sing the carols and light the candles Christ comes again, seeking a place to be, seeking entrance to your heart.

The invitation, again, is to welcome him, and in welcoming him, to open yourself to others, to those who need you, and those you have been avoiding and those who have offended you and from whom you are withholding your forgiveness and love, to those you have ignored and rejected in resentment or merely in the boredom of every day routine.

When Christ comes into your heart, he comes to save you from all of that, from the tempting insularity of urban life, comes to make you vulnerable again, able to feel and care and weep and love. He comes to change you and to save your life.

> **"Later, when the sun had gone down in the late afternoon, the brothers did talk. They were out in the horse lot, working at the stock tank.**
>
> **'All right,' Harold said. I know what I think. What do you think we do with her?' 'We take her in,' Raymond said. . . .Maybe she wouldn't be as much trouble,' he said.**

'I'm not talking about that yet,' Harold said. He looked out into the gathering darkness. I'm talking about—why hell, look at us. Old men alone. Decrepit old bachelors out here in the country seventeen miles from the closest town which don't amount to [much] . . . even when you get there. Think of us. Crotchety and ignorant. Lonesome. Independent. Set in all our ways. How you going to change now at this age of life?

'I can't say,' Raymond said. But I'm going to. That's what I know.
And what do you mean? How come she wouldn't be no trouble?
I never said she wouldn't be no trouble. I said maybe she wouldn't be as much trouble.
Why wouldn't she be as much trouble? As much trouble as what? You ever had a girl living with you before?
You know I ain't, Raymond said.
Well, I ain't either. But let me tell you. A girl is different. They want things. They need things on a regular schedule. Why, a girl's got purposes you and me can't even imagine. They got ideas in their heads you and me can't even suppose. And damn it, there's the baby too. What do you know about babies?
Nothing. I don't even know the first thing about em, Raymond said.
Well, then.
But I don't have to know about any babies yet. Maybe I'll have time to learn.
Now, are you going to go in on this thing with me or not? Cause I'm going to do it anyhow, whatever.
Harold turned toward him. The light was gone in the sky and he couldn't make out the features of his brother's face. There was only this dark familiar figure against the failed horizon.
All right, he said. I will. I'll agree. I shouldn't, but I will. I'll make up my mind to it. But I'm going to tell you one thing first.
What is it?
You're getting [damn] stubborn and hard to live with. That's all I'll say.
Raymond, you're my brother. But you're getting flat unruly and difficult to abide.
And I'll say one thing more.
What?
This ain't going to be [no Sunday] school picnic.
No, it ain't, Raymond said. But I don't recall you ever attending Sunday school either."(p.112-113)

"And she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn . . . .

Amen.